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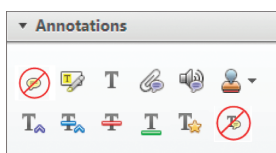
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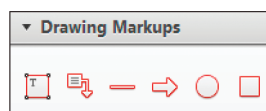
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## Book review

Dialogues in Human Geography  
1–3

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Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2015, 384 pp. 10: 022637954X; 13: 978-0226379548, \$24 (pbk)

### Liberalism and the Elusiveness of Islam

**Reviewed by:** Sami Zemni, *Ghent University, Belgium*

Joseph Massad's *Islam in Liberalism* serves as the prolegomenon for a broader 'intellectual and semantic history of the multiplication of the meanings of Islam since the eighteenth century' (p. 6); a project tentatively called *Genealogies of Islam*. The book:

seeks to understand how Islam became so central to liberalism as ideology and as identity, indeed how liberalism as the antithesis of Islam became one of the key components of the very discourse through which Europe as a modern identity was conjured up. (p. 11)

In the process of constituting itself, liberalism constitutes Islam (p. 12) and – through a ruse – this act of externalization is hidden so that liberalism can assert its superiority. Furthermore, once Islam has been construed as Europe's other, liberalism can deploy a Christian-like 'zealotry of missionizing democracy, women's rights, sexual rights, tolerance, and equality, indeed even of therapeutic methods, specifically psychoanalysis, to cure Muslims and Islam of their un-European, un-Christian, and illiberal ways' (p. 13).

Thoroughly embedded within postcolonial studies and drawing heavily on Edward Saïd's legacy,

Massad's eloquent, engaged and at times passionate style of argumentation, urges, or even exhorts the reader to understand how mainstream assumptions and conceptualizations about Islam and liberalism obscure our understanding of the world and thwart our political imagination. *Islam in Liberalism* is less a theoretical work (the first three chapters presenting arguments that have been made by Massad himself before and many others) than it is an effort to bring critical knowledge on liberalism's claim to universality to a larger public. In his attempt, Massad uses sometimes a rather broad brush that at times misses nuance and definitional rigor.

Massad's definition of liberalism comes to encompass not only the political theories of classic liberal thinkers or the *real* politics of liberal empire but also Stalinist policies towards Islam, and even religiously inspired US foreign policies in the 19th century as well as today; thus, creating an almost transhistorical conceptualization of liberalism that refers simultaneously to a political doctrine combining the 'idea of Europe', US Protestantism as well as a ruling political regime. In this 'lumping together' of such different and at times thoroughly conflicting thinkers, as well as diverse imperial policies, there is a clear danger of essentializing the categories that Massad wishes to deconstruct. The relentless critique of Eurocentrism based on a genuine desire to decolonize knowledge and expose the conceptualizations that construct and produce the non-European is, at times, compromised by a reification of the catch-all concept of 'the West'. Colonialism and imperialism in Massad's account are first and foremost embedded in a civilizational logic – pitting the West against the Rest – much more than in the history of capitalism. The idea of the West is

deployed as a civilizational and transhistorical concept that homogenizes Western history, thought and practices. While attentive to the differences between thinkers such as J. S. Mill and Marx, Huntington and de Tocqueville, and of divergent colonial practices of the British and the French; what emerges is still some sort of overarching Western episteme, a Western way of thinking that can only be colonial and dominating. As Lazarus notes, such a way of thinking ‘flattens out history, failing to register the necessary distinctions between qualitatively different moments, epochs and determinate universes of meaning’ (2011: 15). The intellectual history Massad writes, showing the linkage of Christian Europe, Islam and democracy on the one hand, and the colonial and neocolonial policies (imbued with US Protestantism) that ensued – while often convincing – glosses too easily over the many conflicts, disjunctions and critiques within that history.

How, for example, did ideas and opinions on empire change from critical appraisal (Burke is cited by Massad (p. 50), but others like Diderot or Bentham and Smith could be added) to justifications that replaced nuanced theories of progress with ‘more contemptuous notions of “backwardness” and a cruder dichotomy between barbarity and civilization’ (Pitts, 2009: 2)? Which agencies were responsible for the liberal turn to empire? Massad shortly states that ‘the discipline of Orientalism... would not take these early objections on board but would indulge in representations of “Oriental depositism” and “sultanism” for which Islam was the poster religion’ (p. 51) not really explaining the agencies that constructed this (and not another) type of orientalism. Massad also notes the discrepancy, if not outright hypocrisy, of J.S. Mill or Lord Cromer – both upholding ‘different standards’ for different people’ as to endorse specific imperial policies – but fails to connect it to the concrete processes of nation-building in 19th-century Britain in which liberal thinkers played a leading role in justifying exclusions both at home and abroad.

The tendency to homogenize the West as the central agent of colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism and thus of epistemic domination dematerializes the history of capitalism, the ways in which specific classes with specific interests

expanded their power from Europe; how, through rolling out market mechanisms, new social relations and thus new classes (with particular interests and thus ideological frameworks) emerged in the colonial world, explaining their ‘borrowing’, ‘mimicry’ or ‘rejection’ of ‘Western’ styles of thinking. The slippage between geohistorical (Europe, capitalism, ...) and ideological concepts (orientalism, Eurocentrism, ...) partly undermines Massad’s arguments bringing his critique close to an accusation of a timeless Western way of thinking that somehow – under different guises and through different times – remains more or less the same.

Massad gives more attention to issues of class and capitalism when he brilliantly describes the ontological and epistemological violence that is enmeshed in liberal understandings of sexuality, gender, queer identities and thoroughly problematizes the pathologization of Muslims prevalent in what can be called ‘civilizational psychoanalysis’. Massad’s hope, as stated in an interview, that readers should become cognizant of how debates on Islam and liberalism in the past and present should bring them to ‘overturn their current intelligibility, so that a more effective resistance can be articulated and mounted (theoretically and practically) against their (the terms and the policies) deployment’ (Massad, 2015) remains problematic.

The tendency to homogenize and essentialize Western ways of thinking makes it difficult to see how a critique could ‘transcend’ Western epistemes. Massad criticizes aptly the pitfalls of gender studies in the Muslim world in the form of culturalism, comparatism and assimilationism and convincingly shows why these approaches are actually the ways gender should not be studied (pp. 205–212) and poignantly criticizes the mostly unidirectional nature of international solidarity networks and groups. His critique focuses on the production of ‘sexuality in Islam’, making it possible, according to him, ‘to identify the conscious and unconscious dynamics of epistemological and political complicity of many scholars with Western normativity and the desires to disseminate it globally as a guiding principle of research’ (p. 274). However, it is hard to see what elements, what kind of critique can be used as a stepping stone or starting point for such an

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endeavour. Throughout the book all activists' projects are rendered complicit of sustaining and reproducing these Western epistemologies and even those activists, intellectuals and solidarity networks that aim to go beyond these type of epistemologies are depicted as implicated in imperialist ways of thinking and acting.

It is one thing to show the limits of international activism and unearth its biases, flaws and shortcomings, but it is another thing to be dismissive of the activists' and thinkers' agencies. Instead of looking for a critique that can foster common symbolic and epistemic spaces, that can look for pathways to bypass, transcend or evade Western epistemologies – and thus connect directly with his interlocutors – the reader remains ultimately discouraged and paralyzed, as every move or policy seems to lead time and again to the reproduction of those ontologies that are criticized; even though Massad states that his critique is to foster those forms of resistance that resist the racism and imperialism of Western thought.

This brings me to a final point. As it is difficult to imagine political and intellectual futures beyond his critique, Massad's emancipatory project suffers from a blind spot, that is, Islam and post-secular theory. Muslim and Islamic projects such as Islamism and even jihadism in its many forms seem to be engaged in a 'delinking' of 'East' and 'West', of 'Islam' and

'secular, liberal modernity' but – while not the focus of the book – it remains conspicuously absent from Massad's analyses. The violence in name of jihad or the creation of an 'Islamic question' in European public debates has not only furthered the production of Islam as the archetypical other of the West and reinvigorated racist and Islamophobic discourses but has also reinvigorated post-secular theories (Zemni, 2009). Over the last decades scholars and activists have produced discourses that criticize secular understandings of, for example, women's or gay rights, while acknowledging or at least engaging with religious traditions. A systematic engagement with this literature would have broadened the scope of the book by laying the foundations of political and intellectual alternatives and their critique.

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